

# Some Parables of Nature

J. B. THOMAS



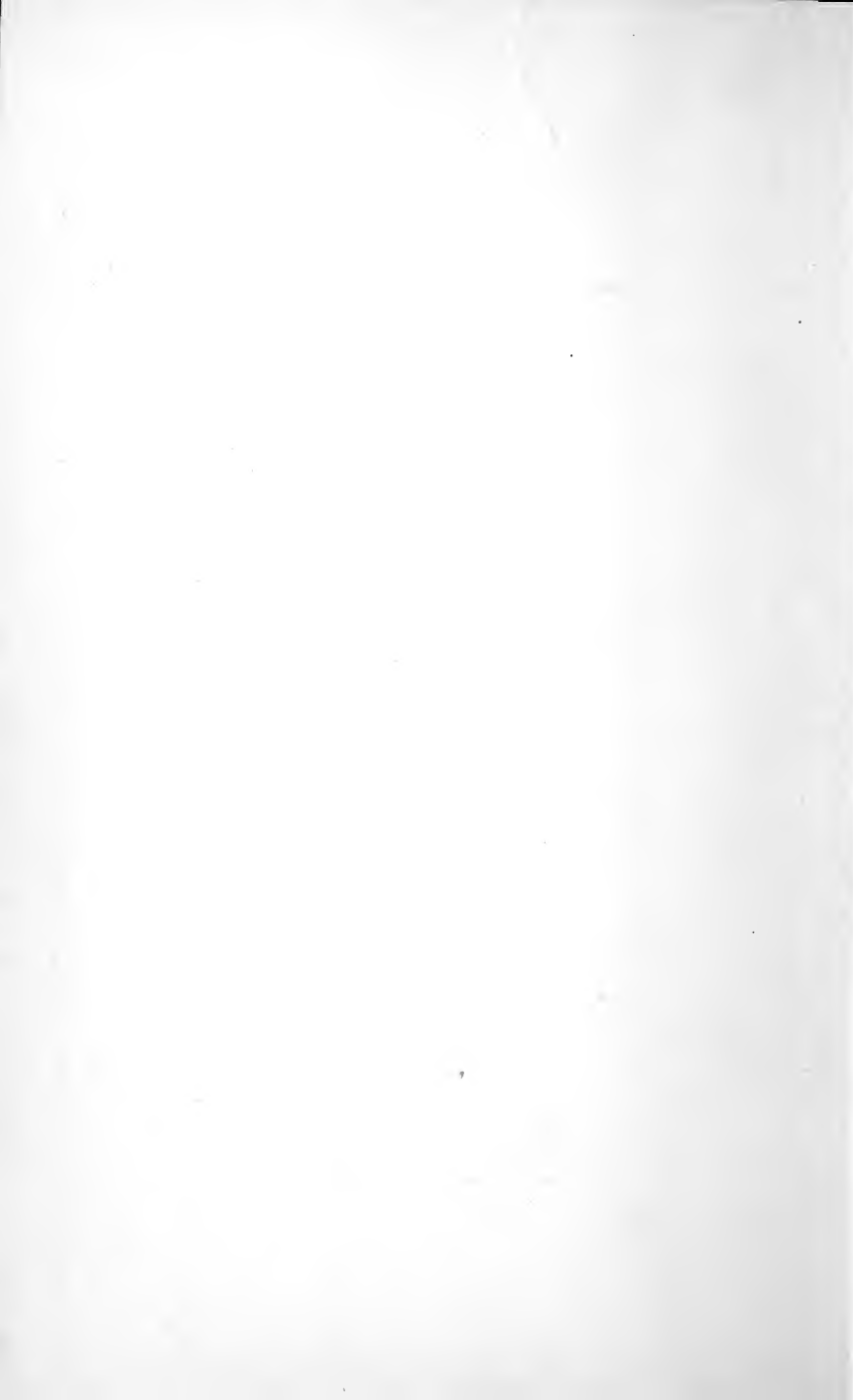
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# SOME PARABLES OF NATURE

IN THE LIGHT OF TO-DAY

*By*

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## INTRODUCTION

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THIS little gem of New Testament study is taken from the *Methodist Review*, with the kind permission of the Editor of that superior journal, because of its exceptional value and the earnest desire of the Publishers that for purely spiritual ends it might be diligently read by all disciples of the Lord Jesus, the Master Teacher.

The standard works of Trench and Bruce on the Parables are familiar to all students of the Holy Gospels and are not surpassed by any similar works in any language; but in the whole range of literature on these marvelous

## INTRODUCTION

teachings of our Lord I know of no work that contains so much in so little as does this little book by Professor Thomas of Newton Theological Institution, which is here offered to the reader. Beautiful and exact in literary form and expression, penetrating in thought, yet clear as a mountain stream, illuminating in exegetical skill, suggestive and spiritual, it can not fail to quicken interest in the method and content of our Lord's teaching in Parables and to show how to study with thoroughness the riches of the Word of God.

R. J. COOKE, *Book Editor.*

**Part I**  
**PRELIMINARY CONSIDER-**  
**ATIONS**



## PRELIMINARY CONSIDER- ATIONS

MATTHEW's record gives us, in a special sense, the gospel of "the Kingdom." He alone uses the phrase "Kingdom of heaven." It is superseded thenceforth by "Kingdom of God." This change may be of no particular importance. But it recalls suggestively Bernard's plausible theory as to the "Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament." There is in the Gospels, he argues, a steady advance of emphasis from Kingdom to King. John, accordingly, mentions the Kingdom in only a single instance—that of the conversation with Nicodemus. His similitudes cluster

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invariably about the person of Christ. He is the "Good Shepherd," the "True Bread," the "True Vine," etc. For light upon the earthward and circumstantial aspects of the coming Kingdom we are thus practically turned back to Matthew. In his narrative alone we find the laws of the Kingdom given in full and connectedly, in the Sermon on the Mount. There also the seven "parables of the Kingdom" appear, symmetrically grouped, in his thirteenth chapter. Only three of these disconnectedly reappear in Luke, two are given in Mark, and none of them elsewhere.

1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARABLE. The deep significance of these parables is seen in our Lord's accompanying comment. He intimates that the

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“scribe,” who has “understood” them, has been made a “disciple to the Kingdom of heaven.” He has thus become “like unto a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.” Evidently these are among those “keys of the Kingdom,” promised His disciples, which open the way to its hid treasures. As such they ought to be prized by those who long for a clue to the labyrinthian paths of its coming development.

The high rank here assigned to parabolic teaching seems the more remarkable because the parable itself so early dwarfs in emphasis and so soon wholly disappears. Beyond the Synoptic Gospels there are no parables, properly speaking. Nor is the parable ever

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again even mentioned in the New Testament. Was it then a rudimentary and ephemeral form of instruction only, destined to give way to riper methods as the intelligence of the listeners advanced? Something like this seems implied in the statement that our Lord taught in parables "as they were able to bear it." But accompanying qualifications indicate that the unreadiness referred to was moral rather than intellectual. Jesus uses language showing His purpose mercifully to veil the deeper truth from the carnal multitude, lest its prematurely full disclosure should provoke instinctive revulsion and so do harm. Notice the striking illustration of this peril in Peter's case. He was not strong enough to listen patiently to the announcement of his Mas-



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ter's coming humiliation. It set him aflame, and he "spake unadvisedly with his lips." This brought upon him stinging but needful rebuke.

The parables need not be shallow because they seem childishly simple. The attainment of perfect simplicity is the highest achievement of art. The depths of the transparent sea appear to lie close to the eye, while the murky waters of the pond remain unfathomed by it. It is more likely that the parable owed the brevity of its ministry to its profundity and breadth of scope than to its superficiality. It dealt so centrally and comprehensively with its theme that its mission was quickly accomplished. There has been but one incarnation, but it embodied "the Truth," once and forever. In like manner the parable,

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doubtless, in the words of Lange, "interpreted eternity in the forms of time." It thus keeps always abreast of the world's thought and solicits successively new interpretations. As Dean Trench has said of the germinal sayings of Christ at large, it may be said with unique emphasis of His parables, "You never get to the end of them."

2. DISTINCTION OF PARABLE AND MIRACLE. The miracle has sometimes been defined as an "acted parable." But the two are, in fact, widely separated by characteristic differences. They had certain features in common, unquestionably. Both startled the people by their unusualness, and their suggestion of outreach beyond the human. But the occasion of surprise in the two cases was wholly distinct. Hearing the

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parable, the cry broke forth, "Whence hath this man this *wisdom*?" Beholding the miracle, they "glorified God who had given such *power* to men." Both carried spiritual lessons, for the miracle was also a symbol (*semeion*). But the idea conveyed by each was unique. The one was a work; the other was a word. The one was evidential in function, aiming at present sense impression; the other was provocative rather, appealing to the rational understanding. The one was primarily redemptive, hinting of the normal order only by pointing to its brokenness, which it came to mend; the other was wholly revelatory, uncovering the working actualities of the ongoing world. The one had an ephemeral function. It manifested the temporary presence

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of the incarnate God, tangibly and immediately. That function being ended, it is gone; the other, turning nature into an "Interpreter's House" which abides, itself abides also as interpreter.

3. DISTINCTION OF PARABLE AND PROVERB. There are no parables in the Gospel of John, as has already been said. He never uses the word *parabole*, but *paroimia* only. This latter term means, properly, a wayside saying or proverb, and is so translated by the revisers in all except a single carelessly treated case. In this latter case (John 10:1-16) it is evident that the writer regards himself as uttering no parable. There is no continuity of narrative, but a string of metaphors only. The metaphor differs from the parable as the hieroglyph differs from the symmetri-

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cal statue or picture. In the one case attention is fixed upon the object illustrated. In the other case it is concentrated upon the illustrating object. The eye being fixed upon Christ as the "Good Shepherd," isolated features from the shepherd life and its surroundings may fitly be adduced, one by one, to illuminate His mission. There is thus no incongruity in speaking of Him as metaphorically the "Door" and the "Shepherd" at once; for it reminds us that He is both the medium and the agent in our salvation. The features assigned to the Son of man, in the first chapter of Revelation, become grotesquely intolerable if taken as furnishing a complete picture and not as disconnected; but rightly understood, as hieroglyphs, they are

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full of meaning. On the other hand, when Matthew fixes our attention upon "the sower" that "went forth to sow," by a preliminary "Behold," we expect a continuous narrative of sequences that are, or normally may be, true. The introduction of falsity or incoherence at any point would be fatal to the narrator's purpose. The parable is a picture, and as such must have unity, fidelity, and just proportion in portrayal.

4. THE PARABLE'S PERENNIAL MESSAGE. The prophetic announcement, "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world," is expressly claimed by Matthew to have been fulfilled in Christ's parabolic teaching. He suggestively,

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in making this claim, puts together the words *katabole* and *parabole*, as if in antithesis. The one literally means a thrusting down or under; the other, a thrusting forth or near. As if it were meant to say that the secrets of nature, buried from the beginning under outward phenomena, were now uncovered to view. It may be fanciful to suggest such antithesis as intended. But it remains true, at any rate, that there is assigned to the parable some fundamental significance as interpreting nature. The charge that Christ and Christianity have been unfriendly to physical research, or to intellectual advance in any direction, could never have been originated except out of human obtuseness or perversity. The exact coincidence of the boundaries of the

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realm of scientific progress with those of Christendom, is a conclusive refutation of the charge. It was Satan that had blinded men, deafened them, and clogged their forward footsteps by paralysis. Christ condemned and reversed all this. And having restored men's powers, He earnestly besought those to whom they had been given back, as well as those who had never lost them, to use faithfully these heavenly gifts. His characteristic words were such as these: "Behold the fowls of the air;" "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear;" "Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk." His characteristic complaint was that men "loved darkness rather than light;" that "seeing," they did not "perceive;" that they were slow to "ask" and to "seek." He piqued the



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curiosity of His disciples by hinting that the most familiar objects had every one an intrusted thought of God for them. Sir John Lubbock, on his knees before an ant-hill, was literally obeying the Solomonic injunction, "Consider her ways." To precisely the same effect, our Lord bade His followers, "Consider the lily." The word used (*katamanthano*) is picturesquely suggestive. It means to get down to, and become a disciple of, the lily. The breadth of range which Christ's allusion to natural phenomena takes is surprising. But even more impressive is the precision with which He seizes the central point of interest and mystery in every case. It is the *feeding* of the birds to which He points as worthy of notice and study in that domain.

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When one has learned the relatively enormous number of the birds, the endless variety of food required, and the marvelous ingenuity and diversity of the devices necessary to secure it, he will surely agree that the bird problem culminates at the "feeding" point. It is the "*singleness*" of the human eye that is chosen for suggestive contemplation. It is this "singleness" that constitutes the chief unanswered problem of the oculist to-day. It is not too much to say that, under the stimulus of Christ's incessant questioning and enigmatic hint, the whole world became studded with interrogation points. "Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?" The question seems a fore-echo of Paul's saying, "The invisible things of Him

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since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made." Milton re-echoes it in his vision of earth as

But the shadow of heaven, and the things  
therein  
Each to other like more than on earth is  
thought.

The notion of such a gigantic parallelism of things visible and invisible is embodied in the often cited passage from Ecclesiasticus: "All things are double, one over against another, and He hath made nothing in vain."

5. BASIS OF INTERPRETATION. The assumption of such a parallelism as is above suggested, accepted as underlying the teaching of the parables, gives them a peculiarly modern look. For

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in that case the likeness between the thing illustrated and the thing illustrating it is not artificial nor fanciful, but real. The parable becomes, thereupon, in order of thought, the counterpart of the so-called "scientific" method of to-day, which seeks by inductive processes to reach out from the known to the unknown. Both set out to "interrogate nature," after Lord Bacon's precept, on the hypothesis that law prevails in the supernatural realm as well as in the natural, and that its operations are, in some respects, alike in both. In some respects only, let us remember, for analogy must not be hastily taken for identity. The growth of the Kingdom of heaven is "like" that of a grain of mustard seed, but not its counterpart throughout. The growth of the peri-

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osteum in man is like that of the bark of a tree. But no physiologist seeks for full information about the former from the latter. The lower tells us something about the higher, which it resembles, but not everything. The expert interpreter of nature untiringly seeks for a solid basis of fact from which to theorize intelligently. He critically observes the phenomena, noting minutiae of identity and difference, and tracing relations of interaction and of sequence. Out of the data, so painstakingly secured, he attempts to sift such uniformities of action as may help him to formulate what he calls "laws." Only from such a carefully and compactly built abutment does he venture to spring his cantalever truss of speculative inference. The interpreter of the

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parables of Christ ought logically to follow the same method. For they present groups of co-ordinated facts, hinting the significant features of agreement or disagreement, and bringing us face to face with a resulting problem. It would seem imperative here also first to master the features of the concrete picture, in detail, before attempting to draw abstract inferences from it. "Not first that which is spiritual," says the apostle, "but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual." It will instruct us little to be told that the Kingdom of heaven is "like" this or that, until we have carefully acquainted ourselves with the characteristics of that which it is said to resemble. To invert this order is to hang the cantalever from midair.

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No part of the Scripture has been subjected to more fantastic caprice, and none has yielded more contradictoriness of result in interpretation, than these parables. Precipitate spiritualization has thus identified the "Kingdom" with the Church, and forbade Church discipline on the authority of the parable of the tares. It has insisted on making "leaven" here mean, exceptionally, a beneficent agency. It has made the "hid treasure" and the "pearl" practically identical in significance. It has found in the parable of the "net" justification of Calvinistic "irresistible grace" on the one hand, and of baptismal regeneration on the other. It is not the purpose of this inquiry to revise these theoretic conclusions in the spiritual sphere, or to attempt new ones in the

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same sphere. It essays a much humbler, but by no means less important task—the preliminary study of the facts themselves, as furnishing the only trustworthy basis of theoretic inference.



**Part II**  
**PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM**



## PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

THE parables in question begin with the word "Behold." The Greek term chosen is significant. It is *eidein*, immediately afterward (in verse 14) contrasted with the inferior *blepein*. The former means to perceive, or see into, while the latter is only to see. It aims not simply at an arrest of the wandering eye and a hasty glance at the picture to be unfolded. A protracted and penetrating study is solicited. The parable is not simply to be heard but patiently "understood." For it avowedly offers an enigma to be resolved, and this implies painstaking consideration of

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details. The facts appealed to are taken from the familiar world about us. They are so chosen and collated as to narrow our attention to certain enigmatic phases of nature's ongoing, which are commended to our careful examination. Not until we have observed and pondered upon nature's methods in the particular case delineated, can we catch her secret, and divine in what respects the Kingdom of heaven is "like" the earthly phenomenon taken as its counterpart. It is essential, therefore, first of all, to note carefully the physical facts selected, their correspondences and differences, their order of sequence, and such other details as may help to single out the exact problem and reach the exact law intended. The value of such study, as illustrative of spiritual

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things, will, of course, depend on the fidelity of the parabolic report of nature's doings. "If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?" But why should we believe the heavenly, if the earthly be not truly portrayed? Whether they are here so portrayed, and whether they fairly suggest the queries and inferences here suggested, is open to inquiry now as then.

The page of Scripture and that of nature ought to correspond if both are from the same Divine Author. And both are still in plain sight and legible. Nineteen centuries of observation and reflection have given us broader and deeper insight into nature and its laws. But nature itself remains unchanged, and so do Christ's words describing it.

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In comparing the two it is immaterial to inquire whether any striking coincidence be due to supernatural insight, or foresight on His part. Our inquiry is not as to His inner thought, which is matter of inference only, but as to His language, which is unmistakable. That His language, naturally understood, does reveal a curious gravitation of emphasis toward the precise subjects of modern research and the very problems now under study will be found, however, equally unmistakable.

It will be convenient to isolate the first four parables, as is done in the narrative. They are there given to the multitude, while the remaining three are reserved for the disciples only. These four fall naturally into a separate and cognate group. The phenomena no-

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ticed belong exclusively to the vital realm, as distinguished from the psychical above and the mechanical below it, and in that realm to the vegetable world only. This sagacious narrowing of the field of vision is a striking anticipation of modernism. The transfer of inquiry from the broadly cosmical to the biological has been the characteristic feature of nineteenth century study. To this Comte long ago attributed the progress of current inquiry, as compared with Greek ultimate stagnancy. And the narrowing of observation, again, to the lower forms of life, is a notable anticipation of current method. For it greatly simplifies the problem by excluding those eccentric factors inseparable from the life of animals and men — sensation, reason, will, con-

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science, and the like. The problem of vital action is thus presented to us reduced to its lowest terms. The first parable confronts us with:



## I. THE PROBLEM OF ENVIRONMENT

The sower, the seed, the sowing, the sunshine, and the rain are assumed as impartially the same throughout, but the diversity in result is startling. Three of the six segments of the sowing bring no final fruitage, and only one comes to its best. How to account for this? All other possibilities having been exhausted, there remains but a single clue to the puzzle—the diversity of environment. The story is so told as to emphasize this diversity and suggest its mastery. The devouring of the seed that falls on the wayside is obviously due to the fact that it has no

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surrounding soil to protect it or encourage germination. That which falls upon "rocky places" soon "withers away" because it has no fit "deepness of earth." That which falls "upon the thorns" is "choked" by its preoccupying and stronger rivals, and so fails in the struggle for life. The bringing forth of "some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty" is not distinctly accounted for. But analogic instinct at once suggests that, as before, diminishing fruitfulness is due to diminishing friendliness of environing conditions. The question raised is thus one and inevitable throughout. It would be superfluous to emphasize the pre-eminence given in modern research to the class of facts thus outlined, and to the explanation it suggests. Environment

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has been found so potent that it has been reckoned well-nigh omnipotent. Its power to limit and to modify is now seen to be so real and so tremendous that it has been credited with power also to create. Being so clearly the cause of much, it has been claimed to be the ultimate—or, at least, the ultimate ascertainable—cause of all. But the problem is not so easily disposed of. The explanation arouses as many questions as it answers. It needs to be explained itself. That many other factors require to be taken into account the narrative clearly implies.

Notice (1) *the making of the environment*. The present environment is a result and not a primal cause. The particular instances here selected make this fact conspicuous. Behind the hard-

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ness of the wayside are the footsteps of man and beasts; and behind these the endless maze of human interests and impulses that have led to its traversing. Behind the shallow plaster of soil upon the rock lie the convulsions that tore rock fragments from their parent bed, and the various later agencies that crushed and pulverized them into fertile form. Behind the aggressive thorns stretches out a long and intricate history of advance, and eccentric degeneration, for thorns are but aborted leaves. Even the good, better, and best soil of the parable is not primeval. If we may trust the patiently reached conclusion of Mr. Darwin, they owe their relative fecundity to no "resident forces." All our vegetable mold, he assures us, has been ground into fertility by the earth-

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worm. Although, with self-effacing modesty, he keeps himself usually buried out of sight, he is, in truth, the head gardener of the universe. Besides this, later investigations uncover the ministry of countless micro-organisms that mediate perpetually between the plant and the soil, helping the one to assimilate the needful elements locked up in the other. In these shrewdly selected instances, therefore, there is brought to our notice the endless reach of interacting agencies, whose efficiency we can not ignore, but whose nature and work we can not gauge. All of these antecede and underlie environmental mastery. It is still true that "there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

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### (2) *The illusion of continuity.*

There is a notably complete line of advance from the stagnancy of the way-side seed, through clearly marked upward steps, to the acme of fruitfulness in the hundred-fold crop. Does not such serial continuity imply also like causal continuity? If "in yesterday already walks to-morrow," must we not find the successively higher to be always a new "mode" of the next lower? Was there any large or more real gap between the almost-reached fruitage of the seed in thorny soil, and that which brought a thirty-fold return, than between the latter and the sixty-fold crop next above it? May we not say that the actuality of the latter is a materialization of the "potency" of the former, to borrow a phrase familiar among

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physicists? The facts out of which the modern notion of universal continuity of development has been conjured are here given a plausible statement, but the notion itself finds no recognition. There are degrees of goodness and of badness respectively, but no genetic relation between them. There is an abrupt division of the series into two groups—and between crop and no crop there is absolute antithesis. Failure, complete or partial, is not the birth throe of success. Evil is not “good in the making.” The devil, who is “the father of lies,” is not, therefore, the grandfather of truth.

(3) *Specious uniformity.* The precision of parabolic language, even in allusion to minor details, is observable in the explanation given of what befell

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the seed falling upon rocky ground. It “sprang up quickly *because* it had no deepness of earth.” The fact of such rapid springing up was obvious to any observer, but its correct explanation was then not so. We now know that the rocky substratum, catching and reflecting the sun rays, cradled the young growth in peculiar warmth, and so hastened its advance. The further remark that it was when the “sun was *risen*” that the feebly rooted plants “withered away” is equally accurate and full of suggestiveness. The “rising” so referred to must needs be its seasonal climb toward the summer solstice, for the rooting could not occur in a single day. When the sun rides high in summer its thermal ray overmatches the luminous, as that had already displaced



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the actinic ray of spring. James, in his Epistle refers to this as bringing "burning heat." By this marvelous change in mode of energy displayed, the sun adjusts itself continuously to the advancing needs of plant life; but the change from the mild actinic ray, which nurtures all life in its incipient stages, to the fiercer thermal ray, which also brings healthful ripening to the plant in good soil, ministers death to the tenant of the shallow, rock-bottomed tract. This subtle change in the apparently uniform emission of solar force may well remind us of the illogical nature of the processes by which we may bring ourselves to speak of the "uniformity of nature," and build ponderous and fallacious theories thereon.

(4) *Seeming self-sufficiency of na-*

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*ture.* Lucretius persuaded himself, a long time ago, that "nature can do all things, without the help of the gods." "Natural selection" has been sometimes theoretically endowed with like semi-divine independence of efficiency. But in this parable we are reminded that the soil which fosters the seed does not create it, and that the seed, being created, can normally reach the soil only by being sown. Observe that, instead of using the familiar and direct designation of the seed (*siton* or *sperma*), our Lord, in His explanation of the parable, resorts to a periphrastic form of expression—"that which is sown." This might be dismissed as accidental, but for the uniform abstention throughout the parable, from the ordinary term, and the unusual character

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of the roundabout phrase substituted. This is the more suggestive because of the fact that the cereals are in a peculiar sense "that which is sown." Grass grows by the root, and is self-protecting and self-propagating. But the cereal is uniquely dependent on the ministry of man. The geologic record shows it to have been twin-born with him, and that it came into existence full-formed, without traceable antecedents. It has never been found wild, as Decandolle assures us, and when left to itself it does not degenerate as other plants do, but disappears. It is also peculiarly perishable when gathered. MacMillan says, "It is not probable that there was ever a year and a half's supply of bread at one time in the world," and "The human race comes every year within a

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month of starvation.” Cereal life is also singularly helpless and unhelped except by man. It is not self-fertilizing. It is not aided at this point by birds or insects, as many other organisms are. Its delicate pollen must be scattered indiscriminately by the wind, and is always in danger of being destroyed by violent blasts or drenching rains. It is the victim of myriads of insects, as well as of rust and mildew. It is plain, then, that the cereal is neither a product nor a favorite of “natural selection.” It never originates, and can not survive, apart from man. His prescient care must prepare the soil and scatter it, and his hand must gather and preserve it for future sowing, or it would perish outright. It illustrates in unimpeachable fashion the

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incapacity of nature alone mechanically to meet all the needs of vital organisms.

(5) *The mystery of waste.* Of the six tracts here described as sown only one made full return. Of the remainder two were partially and three wholly unresponsive. Was the bulk of the seed therefore wasted? Here we come upon a perennial stumbling-block of cosmic theorists. Nature seems to destroy as ruthlessly as it creates lavishly. Yet the word "waste" is, in fact, a malleable and delusive one. The highway was infertile, yet it was indispensable. The rock was good to build upon, although unfit to sow upon. Even the thorns might be wrought into a serviceable hedge. The objectionable and obstructive, from one point of view, may be usable and even necessary from an-

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other. No one but the general, who has the whole field of battle in view, can decide on the wisdom of a single company movement. The "sower" who here "went forth to sow" furnishes light thereby on the problem. The wheat he holds in his hand is essential to his life. If it be wholly lost, no wit of man can replace it by manipulation of the grasses; no chemist can find a substitute for it as a vehicle of life. Of it he may justly say, "Teneo et teneor," for he holds it in life by sowing, and it, in turn, holds him in life by the harvest it returns. But being a creature of appetite, and knowing that it is good for food, why does he not eat it as the horse would? Being an observing creature, and seeing that the seed in the furrow will dissolve and dis-

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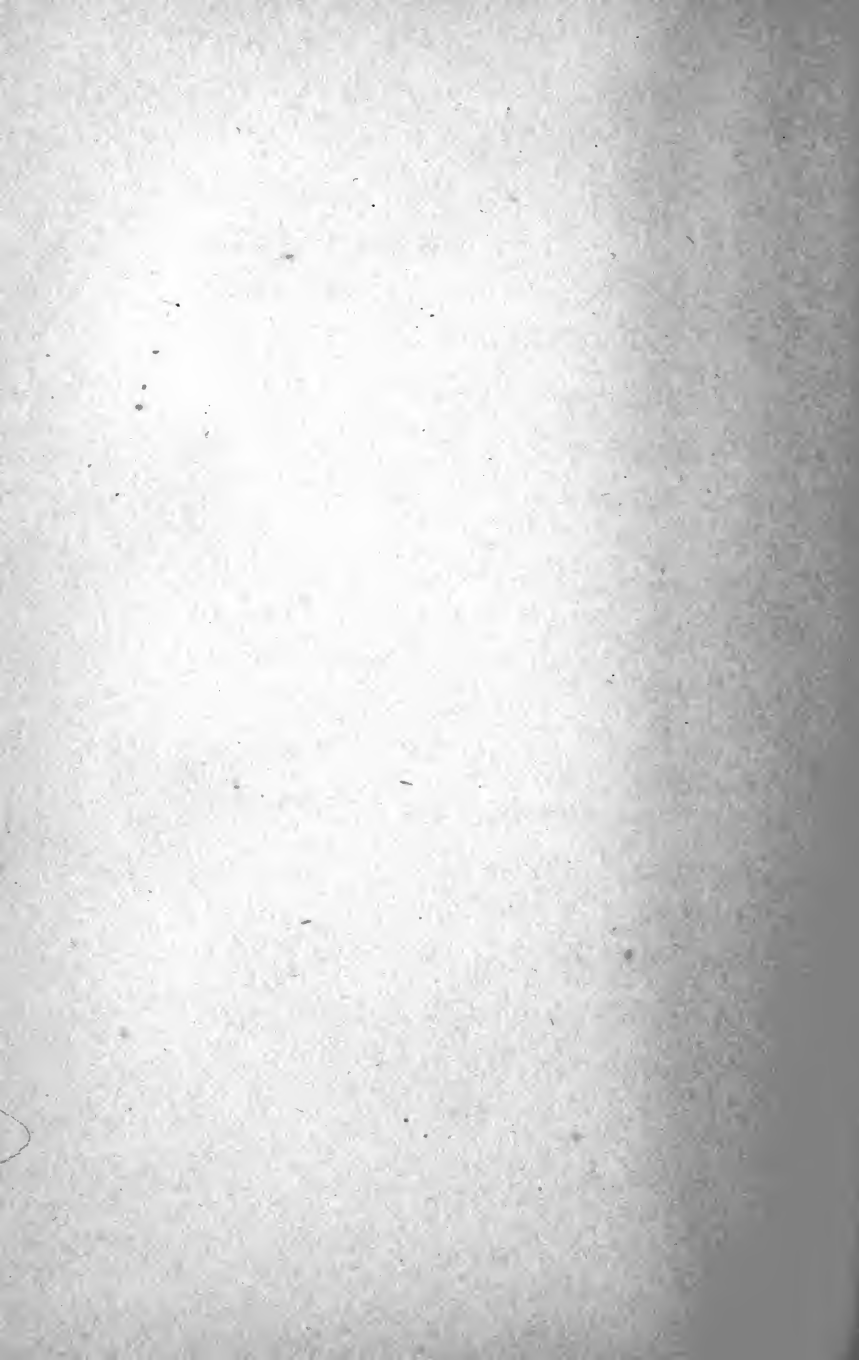
appear, why does he commit it to such a fate? Or if, being also "a creature of large discourse, looking before and after," he perceives that seeming dissolution is not real, but the way to a new and increased life, he must also see that there are formidable difficulties in the way. Beyond his hand, it is beyond his reach. It must be left to the mercy of mechanical and incalculable forces, with grave uncertainty as to result. Why, then, should he exchange the secure for the problematic? Or, again, he knows that the seed must have fit soil, for he "goes forth" to find it. He knows that in sowing some must be scattered on the wayside, some on rocky ground, and some among thorns. Why, then, does he not drop it patiently, seed by seed, in fruitful fur-

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rows, rather than entail foreseen and reckless waste by sowing broadcast? The future crop may be uncertain if the seed be trusted to wind and weather, but it is impossible else. The waste of time in planting, seed by seed, would far outweigh the waste of seed in scattering. And, from the bird's point of view, the wayside seed would not be wasted. "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth." The "sower" still deliberately goes forth to sow, and the judgment of the ages is that he commits no waste.



THE question of environment proposed in the parable of the sower is broadly cosmic. In the parable of the tares, which follows, a narrower field of inquiry is chosen.



## II. THE PROBLEM OF ORGANIC ORIGINS

Our attention is now diverted from the behavior of the soil to that of the seed. It is no longer the hindrance of normal growth that occasions surprise, but the intrusion of the apparently abnormal. Admitting that diversity of soil may occasion increase or diminution of fruitage even where the soil is all good, how are we to account for entire change of fruitage where soil and seed are both alike good? "Didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? Whence then hath it tares?" There is surmise as well as surprise in the question. One of two possible explanations

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seems always to have promptly occurred to men. They are:

1. *Spontaneous Generation.* The notion that nature, which "can do all things, without the help of the gods," can make the forces it has generated blaze of themselves into life at last, has seemed plausible enough from the time when men began to guess at the riddle of the universe. If motion becomes heat, why may not heat become life? Sanguine experimenters are still dreaming of brewing life out of a gallipot. They are still falling in love with work of their hands as Pygmalion did, and trying to extort the gift of breath for it. But success grows less and less likely. The man who thinks he has reached the desired goal only reveals his own carelessness or incompetency as an

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observer; if we may trust one who was himself so competent an observer as Professor Huxley. It is a finally accepted axiom that "there is no egg except from an egg." This interpretation of the mystery failing, there remains the alternative and equally self-commending one, of

2. *Transmutation of Species*. Granting that the relatively simple and inflexible wheels of nature may not grind out a thing so complex and flexible as life, may not the larger endowment of life itself account for the new phenomenon? The traditional theory that wheat may capriciously turn into "chess" or "cheat" still lingers among sense-taught rustics. The Darwinian canon, that morphologic likeness infallibly reveals genealogic relationship of

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affinity or descent, grows out of a similar conception. For the fact that nature often indulges in "sports," true to type in general but variant in detail, manifestly made it possible to believe that the novel yet nearly resembling "cheat" might have sprung from the familiar wheat. But to accept mere resemblance of form as universally the index of alliance, through "descent with modification," leads to gross absurdity. We must then believe that the rose leaf is the progenitor of the rose-leaf bug, which copies it slavishly, even to discoloration and spots of decay. We must even suspect some genetic affinity between these two and the curiously patterned frost leaf on the pane. It is at least worth observing that, as before noted, no form of vegetable life

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better fitted to refute the notion in question could have been chosen than the cereal; for it has, in a unique sense, resisted the attempt to discover ancestral relations for it or to find any tendency to variation or reversion to a cruder form. The enigma, therefore, is not to be thus solved. Meantime the mimicry of the wheat by the tares, emphasized in the parable, demands a passing notice. It brings into view the much-debated theory of

3. *Protective Resemblance.* It has been argued plausibly that certain inferior forms of life have survived because they have acquired or retained marked imitative peculiarities. These resemblances were thus somehow originated, it was thought, out of the necessities of the weak and were defensive

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in character. But the tares in the present case, although "protected" from uprooting by their resemblance to the wheat, were themselves the aggressors upon their better, though weaker, rival. And this exposes the fallacy of the theory in question; for nature, in fact, equips her combatants for their life struggle with unimpeachable impartiality. The tawny striped hide of the tiger conceals him, in the jungle, from the humble creature he seeks to pounce upon as completely as any of its peculiarities protects it from him. It is a curious inversion of logic, in any case, for those who attribute the production of every idiosyncrasy to the mechanical operation of unintelligent causes to seize upon a single one as in itself betraying intelligent originating purpose.



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That the tares bear an uncanny likeness to the wheat does not prove that they are born of the wheat they help to destroy, nor that the likeness was intended to preserve them while doing their unfriendly work. We must look beyond any of the causes assigned for the explanation of the new phenomenon. The true and only cause is found in the discovery of

4. *An Unseen World of Micro-organisms.* The microscope has now uncovered a hitherto unsuspected realm of life. Earth, water, and air are found to swarm with millions of infinitesimal spores, largely inimical to life in its higher ranges. These look vigilantly for a lodgment, and, having found it, multiply with amazing speed. From this hidden realm come the in-

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truders whose origin once seemed so obscure. They are not the aberrant outgrowth of familiar things, nor are they seedless in origin. They bear seed "after their kind," and are born of seed, as rigorously as any plant or tree. And this nineteenth century account of the matter is substantially identical with that given in this parable. It is not the soil nor the wheat that has produced the tares; "an enemy hath done this." It was secret work, for it was done "while men slept." It was actual and alien seed, for it was "sowed." The "kingdom of darkness" constantly referred to in Scripture has its counterpart at least in that occult region from whence come these insidious foes. It is the hiding place and arsenal of the "enemy."

### III. THE PROBLEM OF A VITAL FORCE

The parable of the mustard seed narrows and deepens the field of vision. It passes from soils, and seeds, and the abnormal processes of hindrance or intrusion from without, to the behavior of a single seed working normally from within. It fastens attention on the inherent mystery of germination and growth. The companion parable, given by Mark, puts it pithily. It notes the wonder of him who has "cast seed upon the earth," that it should "spring up and grow, he knoweth not how." The theorist is apt to imagine the restate-

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ment of the problem as equivalent to its solution. "I never was born, but just grewed," said Topsy. Growth is so familiar a phenomenon that we are content to call it "natural" and assume that it is therefore simple. The high evolutionist echoes Topsy's simple explanation of the existing order of things, but substitutes a new name: "The universe never was created but just evolved" (that is "grewed," as he takes pains to explain). But the word "grow" (to say nothing of "evolve") is highly cabalistic. It masks much more than it reveals. It notes visible advance, through shoot and trunk, to full-formed tree, but it tells nothing of the hidden agency that masters complex processes, and guides them wittingly to a definite result. The word

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“grow,” moreover, is well fitted to betray us through its elasticity of application. It readily takes on a metaphorical sense, which then is assumed to be literal. Witness the familiar trope, “the more the marble wastes the more the statue grows.” It is precisely this figurative use of the word which, illusively treated as literal, gives color to the Darwinian explanation of the “origin of species.” The evolutionary “growth” there appealed to is mechanical erosion; it is not “natural” but artificial. The phenomena of growth here hinted at remind us of its still unsolved mysteries involved. It must be said of them, now as then, “he knoweth not how.”

1. *Automatism.* Until “sowed” the seed is as helpless a victim of mechan-

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ical force as the clod. But, unlike the clod, it hides in itself an intangible somewhat which the experimentalist can not discover, and for which he has no better name than the obviously unscientific one, a "potency." By help of this it "springs up," mastering henceforth the force of gravity that has been thus far its master. Thoreau thought he saw a master key of the enigmas of growth in the image of an inverted tree carved out by the rainfall on the side of a railroad embankment. But the key does not reach the deepest wards of the lock. The water is drawn irresistibly down along a channel mechanically shaped by visibly controlling stone or nodule; but the tree springs up and there are no discoverable molds into which it runs.

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2. *Increase by Assimilation.* The "smallest of all seeds" becomes "greater than the herbs." We are told that some seeds not a hundredth part of the size of a pin's head grow in a single night to the size of a great gourd. They multiply cells at the rate of nearly a hundred million in a minute. They grow as much in a night as our children do in ten years. And this growth in bulk is not the result of aggregation only, as in case of the mineral. That accumulates mechanically, under mathematic regimen, and remains homogeneous throughout. But the seed lays hold of the soil into which it has been cast only to spring from it. It borrows material from it only to transmute and incorporate it into itself. It gathers, digests, differentiates, and or-

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ganizes it into a symmetrical whole. It shapes and reshapes its own organs at need. In all this it parts widely from the non-living realm.

3. *Creative Activity.* "It becometh a tree." The old quarrel between the evolutionist and the epigenesist turned on the question whether the tree was simply an enlarged phase of its own miniature self, existing in the seed, or whether it had come to be as a new thing. The latter doctrine has prevailed, although by a curious freak of inversion it has taken on its old rival's name. It is now commonly agreed that the process by which the great branching tree is elaborated from the tiny round seed is one involving a strictly creative element. The germinal protoplasm is absolutely structureless to the



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sharpest microscopic vision. More than that, it literally dies; that is to say, it disintegrates and disappears. The causative source of the unfolding tree is that mysterious somewhat within the seed beyond the longest reach of scalpel or microscope, which has been already alluded to as a "potency." So that the "things that are seen were not made of the things that do appear." The "potency" thus revealed is not a resultant of slowly advancing processes from below. "The change is instantaneous," says Beale; "the life flashes, as it were, into the particles, and they live." And it is itself as new and as diverse in action as are the things it brings into being. Chemical compounds are homogeneous and symmetric. All crystallization is in straight lines. But "in germs

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the want of symmetry is the first hint of formative purpose." "Vital movements differ from all others in being unsymmetrical and in all directions and forms; without rhythm." Asserting its freedom from the mechanical, at first, in this spasmodic and erratic way, life settles anon into a new form of symmetry, revealing itself in the curved grace and beauty of leaf, and flower, and fruit. It is an unmistakably new agency that, through counterpoised heredity and variation, brings into being things perennially new.

4. *Selective Efficiency.* The brainless, wingless seed, cast upon the wayside, can neither see nor escape the more richly endowed bird. But, quickened, it has wit enough to build a structure so elaborate and attractive that

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“the birds of heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.” By what strange power is it helped to solve problems that the birds can not? For there are here prodigies of achievement in the solution of problems chemical, mechanical, architectural, and artistic. And they are solved without help of crucible, pattern, or tool of any kind. The earthworm, which seems but a random scratch at the bottom of nature’s page, is able, as Mr. Darwin satisfied himself by repeated experiments, to solve the problem of least resistance as accurately as the most acute mathematician. For he seizes the stone or paper left near his hiding place at exactly the right point to drag it most easily over his door. The hermit of Walden Pond was curious to learn how much pump-

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kin there might be in his back yard. He did not turn to the Academy of Sciences for information, knowing it would be a vain quest, but he put a diplomaless pumpkin seed into the soil and set it upon the task of answering. It ferreted out forty pounds of pumpkin and hung its answer on the garden fence. A perishing vine has been known, impelled by that "scent of water" of which Job speaks, to climb an intervening wall that it may thrust its thirsty roots into a well on the farther side. The mystery of life thus outlined suggestively in the first century remains as attractive and as impenetrable in the twentieth. The challenge "Have ye understood all these things?" remains still unmet. We have resolved life into a "potency," but have thereby

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confessed its secret to be beyond the reach of microscope or crucible. It lingers, inaccessible, "behind the veil."

The antithesis between the good and bad soils finds expression in a single parable, that of the sower. The same is true as to the good and bad seed. But it requires two parables, that of the mustard seed and that of the leaven, to bring out the contrast between growth and counter-growth. The latter parable, accordingly, propounds a serious problem.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF DESTRUCTIVE AGENCIES

The most intricate and baffling of the phenomena that confront the biologist are those connected with fermentation. "We have, as yet, no certain idea of the action of organic ferments." So wrote Schutzenberg in 1876. Johnson, in his "Chemistry of Common Life," pronounced it "physiologically and chemically inexplicable." Subsequent research has left the riddle only incompletely solved. The parable of the leaven fixes our inquiring gaze upon this uniquely perplexing process, seizing with wonderful accuracy upon its most eccentric features.

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1. *Shrinking from Light.* The leaven is not said to have been "sown" as were the seed in the preceding parables. It was "hid" in the receiving medium. For the yeast plant belongs to that singular section of the plant world, the fungoid, which reverses the ordinary and essential habit of the vegetable kingdom; it "loves darkness rather than light." It still further divorces itself from its kindred, and allies itself with the animal kingdom. For, like the animal, and unlike any other vegetable, it absorbs oxygen and gives off carbon dioxide. It thus takes on often a flesh-like texture and odor, even becoming fetid and attracting carrion flies. Its behavior at this point has seemed so paradoxical to some biologists that they have assigned it a separate place, as in-

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termediate between plants and animals. These peculiarities, together with its intolerance of light, explain the necessity of its being "hid" rather than sown.

2. *Parasitism.* All plants which shun the light, thereby rob themselves of power to decompose the inorganic elements of the soil and assimilate the product. They thus become necessarily parasitic; they must feed on that which lives or has lived. The leaven must needs have been hid in meal, therefore, for that had been vitalized. In the soil it would quickly perish. Finding a congenial place, it would begin at once to disintegrate the highly complex tissues of the meal, degrading them to their original inorganic state. It would thus wantonly and quickly unmake what the living plant had so deftly and



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patiently made. The discovery of the wide prevalence of such apparently maleficent agencies in the organization of the universe has been an occasion of endless surprise and bewilderment. It is the more astonishing because of the marked indulgence given them. There are said to be over three thousand species of vegetable parasites alone. They multiply in numbers and develop in size with a speed that is startling. MacMillan tells of fungi that throw off thirty thousand cells a minute and grow three inches in twenty-five minutes. Why should these malign destroyers be given so great advantage in the struggle for life over the nobler forms on which they prey? We here reach the edge of the broader and age-long question which lurks behind all such inquiries: how to

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explain the permitted origin of physical evil in any form.

3. *Toxic Stimulus.* The most mysterious element of the process in question remains still to be remarked upon. The leaven having been hid in the meal, the "whole was leavened." No report is made as to what befell the leaven itself. The meal was not incorporated into its life, but leavened, that is, modified by its diffused influence. But how? Here is the crux of the problem. Fermentation was formerly attributed to independent chemical agency. On the discovery of the yeast plant it was at once credited to its vital working; but later investigation shows the newly found organism to be the occasion only, not the direct originator, of the process. Fermentation is a process of

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dissolution which, left to itself, ends in putrefaction and destruction. The growing leaven can not of itself directly accomplish this, but it has the extraordinary power to subsidize innocent chemic forces to its nefarious purpose. The dough, stirred by the chemic gases thus generated, rises and grows as if alive. But it is a counterfeit of life only. It is incipient death. It thus appears that the three kingdoms are insidiously laid under tribute by the leaven to inaugurate a process which, permitted to go on to completion, would infect the wholesome meal into which it is admitted and make it poisonous. For, being a plant, it has taken on animal features and functions from above, and laid hold of and compelled the help of chemic forces from below,

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to accomplish its unfriendly work. The mystery grows deep. But a hint of relief is given in the suggested

4. *Subordination of Evil to Good.* The leaven was not hid in the meal unintelligently, nor without purpose. The "woman" who hid it was certain to keep her eye on it, and at the right time thrust the loaf into the oven. The leaven was suffered to proceed only so far as could be healthfully appropriated. Joseph's brethren "meant it for evil" when they sent him forward through the pit to slavery, but God "meant it for good," and brought good through it. The leaven still may "mean it for evil" when it breeds incipient toxin in the meal, but the shrewd house-mother also still "means it for good," and continues wisely to hide it in the meal.

## V. THE PROBLEM OF PARABOLIC PURPOSE

All seven parables reveal a carefully marked line of demarcation and contrast. They set the evil over against the good, the false over against the true. They reiterate, also, an earnest warning against deception through failure to discriminate the really true from that which is only illusively so. As in the case of the mustard and the leaven, so in that of the hid treasure and the pearl, two parables are set over against each other to bring out the antithesis. These two parables are notably alike in some particulars. Some

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interpreters have even inclined to treat them as substantially identical in purport because of this. In each a man becomes aware of a treasure, in each he becomes its owner, and in each it costs his all to secure it. Were this all that is meant, it is inconceivable that two parables should have been given where one would have sufficed. The real significance of the teaching must lie in the differences noted. These seem to center in the mental attitude of the two men. The finding was in the one case an accident and surprise; in the other it was the outcome of intelligent and patient search, ending only with the finding of the particular "pearl of great price." In the one case the treasure was hid again, its nature even not being disclosed; in the other it was

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plainly utilized. In the one case the field, with its still hidden prize, was bought; in the other it was not the casket containing the pearl, nor the gulf from which it had come, and where others might lie hid, but the pearl itself that was secured. This contrast touches the marrow of purpose in parabolic teaching.

1. *Indolent Content with Superficial Truths.* The parable has been defined as the "husk which keeps the kernel from the indifferent and for the earnest." In this sense it was said to have been given to the careless multitude, "that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand." And this concealing function is as true of the "all parables" nature gives her children as of those given by

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Christ. Balearic mothers used to place their younglings' breakfast on an overhanging limb that they might learn to bring it down with a bow. The earth brings forth fruit of itself, and holds it out to the hungry, that they may learn to improve it. It invitingly betrays the hiding place of coal and the precious metals that they may be dug for and wrought. It sets us simple lessons in swimming and flight in the equipment of fishes and birds that we may build ships and aeroplanes. It furnishes a primer of artistic form and color in the flowers that Phidias and Raphael may be taught thereby. But he who dismisses flower, bird, coal, and wheat as exhausted of all possible, if not all real, meaning for us by chemical, and histological, and mechanical analy-



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sis, has "stuck in the bark." It is not true that nothing is true except what we can "experimentally verify." He who thinks so contents himself with half-truths instead of the truth. He willingly carnalizes the vision and buries the proffered treasure in the earth. In his case, surely, if "knowledge comes," it is true that "wisdom lingers."

2. *Earnest Quest for Final Truth.*  
Before the ever-sharpening eye of the explorer, reaching higher into the heavens, piercing deeper into the heart of the material world beside us, differences of material constitution tend to disappear, forces resolve themselves into modes of a single force, laws unify themselves as law. This convergence in the world of sense awakens

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reasonable expectation of like convergence in the equally real, although far more occult, world of sensation and mentality. Beyond the solid and easily accessible earth lies the restless unfathomable sea. Out of its mysterious depths comes the pearl. It is unique among gems. No other requires half the courageous venture or entails half the peril in obtaining. The pearl diver, armed with a knife to contend against sharks, and with ears and nostrils artificially protected against the enormous pressure below, plunges into the deadly depths. Life is often the cost of the venture. The pearl alone, unlike the diamond or any other gem, will endure no touch of human hand. Like the altar of old, the "workman must not lift up any tool upon it." It alone,

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also, is the product of vital processes. It is the response of a wounded life covering with loving beauty the unfriendly grain that has wounded it. The process is mysterious but the fact unquestioned. Complete in itself, the product of suffering and bought through suffering, at the peril of life, it seems to betray the deepest secret of the universe. One can but remember that while the foundations of the heavenly city are varied, its every gate is of a single pearl. And we also are reminded that Jesus said, "I am the door." The Jews were proud of their exclusive title to the Scriptures. They "thought" that "in them they had eternal life." But they were content with the husk; they did not faithfully "search" for the life therein. He only

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who goes below the surface phenomena of the terrestrial can find in the depths of the spiritual “the truth”—the “pearl of great price.”

The last three parables are addressed to the disciples alone. It may be assumed that they require keener vision, to reach their greater depth of significance, than do the others. They lay less exclusive emphasis on the independent ongoing of the lower world, passing on to consider the motives and conduct of men as influenced by or influencing nature. Human nature is a part of nature at large, and as such it is subject to generic laws, but the edifice of creation enlarges as it rises. Its higher stories successively overhang the lower. Physiology is harder to understand than physics, and psychology harder than either, and the ascending hierarchy of laws grows steadily more voluminous and subtly intricate. These parables may, therefore, be dismissed with briefer and less confident comment, for the "well is deep."



## VI. THE CONCLUDING DIS- CLOSURE

The Orientals call the sea the "night of the depths." The earth itself sprang out of it. All life is still born of water. It is the home of unsolved mysteries. The things that fall into it "suffer a sea change into something rich and strange." Strange forms of life play in its waters, and the waters themselves thrill with strange forces. It fitly sums up the dominant features of the present unexplained order.

1. *The Realm of Conspicuous Freedom.* It is the "uncharted sea." It tolerates no fences nor proprietary

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lines. It bears up impartially and parts easily to the touch of all its varied tenants. It gives ungrudging room to the grasping octopus and the savage shark, as well as to the innocent small fry and the beneficent food fishes. Its fluent tides are released from the unchanging rigidity of the earth. In this primary impression, of unobstructed play of independent forms and forces, it fairly symbolizes the world at large. The flying clouds, the tangled copse, the wandering winds, the variegated landscape, the flitting bird, the springing forest tenantry, as well as the dancing wave, testify of movement of all at "their own sweet will." Of this free agency man is supremely conscious. It makes his conduct so capricious and unpredictable that a technically accurate science



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of history has been pronounced impracticable. Of all the mysteries of this present world none is more profound than the sudden explosion of those wanton extravagances of popular passion that led Bishop Butler to question whether communities might not, like individuals, become instantly insane.

2. *The Realm of Hidden Law.* Behind the veil in the old tabernacle, in the depths of the sacred ark, reposed the tables of the law. In nature, in like manner, deeper research brings us always in sight of hidden law. The sweep-net of the parable curbs no present freedom; it sends forward no warning shadow; it does not obtrude nor in any way plainly report its presence. But it moves on, "unhasting, unrest-

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ing," impartial, irresistible, inevitable. When its work is done the freedom and concealment of the sea have given place to utter helplessness of exposure in the open day upon the naked shore. So the ashes of Vesuvius suddenly arrested, transfixed, and permanently exposed to the gaze of succeeding ages the hidden immoralities of Pompeii. So the ripened harvest of the world has been more than once reaped by some convulsion of nature, as the harvest of the sea is here represented to be. Uniformitarianism is no longer tenable as fully explanatory of the history of the universe. The culmination of the ripening year, the culmination of every life history, the culmination of the age-long movements of mankind all point on to

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One far off divine event  
To which the whole creation moves.

The round of parables thus completes itself. Beginning with the planted seed, it ends in the final "thrusting in the sickle, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." "Nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest" in that day, and in its manifestations will be revealed the "righteous judgment of God" embodied in the present providential order.





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